

**FEMINIZATION OF THE WOODS
IN TANA FRENCH'S *IN THE WOODS*
AND DOLORES REDONDO'S *EL GUARDIÁN INVISIBLE***

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The article studies the narrative means of feminizing the image of the woods in two novels, *In the Woods* by Tana French and *El Guardián Invisible* by Dolores Redondo. The main approach employed is feminist literary criticism. One of the key concepts is Michel Foucault's heterotopia. The methodology of analysis involves comparing plot building devices, important motifs, and spatial poetics of the woods in the novels under study. It was revealed that these novels manifest important similarities from the point of view of depicting the woods as femininity-related heterotopia and link its symbolism with the national mythologies of the two cultures, Irish and Basque-Navarran.

Key words: heterotopia, the woods, Tana French, *In the Woods*, Dolores Redondo, *El Guardián Invisible*, feminization.

Michel Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopia as physical setting that human mind perceives as space of otherness [Foucault 1986: 22–27]. Heterotopian space becomes many things at ones, it can be politicised and gendered. Feminist theorists came to associate heterotopias with femininity because in the European androcentric culture woman has often been conceptualised as “Other” and considered irrational, incomprehensible, and chaotic. Since heterotopia also entails ambiguity, polymorphism, and otherness, feminine space as an out-of-control place has important features of heterotopia. One of the most frequently revisited literary heterotopias today is the image of the woods.

Over the last two decades, the woods or forest in crime fiction has become one of the prevailing types of landscape. The action set in the woods re-enacts mystical and mythological powers of nature and the pagan past of

the humankind. Joseph Campbell links the archetype of the woods with the “first stage of the mythological journey” [Campbell 2003: 53]. In the world literary tradition from myths and fairy tales until now, a journey to the woods has been associated with a metaphysical quest for the selfhood, rites of passage, death and rebirth, and fighting with the evil creatures. The symbolism of the woods in contemporary female detective fiction relates both to the national mythology of the authors’ cultures and to feminist remythologizing – transformation of once closed and controlled space into the boundless and cosmic one. The aim of this article is to compare two novels written by an Irish and a Spanish author – Tana French’s *In the Woods* and Dolores Redondo’s *El Guardián Invisible* – regarding gender poetics of the image of the woods.

The main characters of Tana French’s *In the Woods* (2007) are Rob Ryan and Cassie Maddox. They are trying to unravel the murder of a twelve-year-old girl whose dead body was found on the ancient Celtic altar on the site of archaeological research near the woods and the village of Knocknaree. Rob is eager to work on the case because as a child he underwent shocking experience and partial amnesia on the very same site.

At the age of twelve Rob, who then was called Adam, went to the woods with his friends Jamie and Peter, and the kids went missing. Many hours later Adam was found shock-stricken, dumb, and clinging to the tree. No trace of the other two children was ever discovered. The boy lost memory of that night; his family had to move to England and give him a different name. On returning to Ireland, Rob is still obsessed with the mystery of the woods and the haunting images of his friends.

Cassie joins effort with Rob to combat the evil spirits of his unresolved past. However, Rob betrays her both as a lover and as a partner in detection, and although they solve the latest murder case, the culprit gets away with her crime, and the old mystery of the missing kids remains unveiled. The image of the woods is central to the narrative. It is depicted as a heterotopia stuck in a time loop, dangerous and endangered at the same time.

Rob’s relationship with Cassie follows the same pattern as his engagement with the woods: strong attraction and unconscious fear. Rob values Cassie as a professional but does not entirely trust her. Moreover, he feels anxious about her growing influence over him, and, following the masculinist conceptualization of woman as the Other, associates her with the chaotic and rebellious forces of the dark. After all, Rob’s inability to look his fears in the eye restoring the bits previously erased from memory and to come to terms with his fragmented self is a consequence of the character’s infancy and subconscious misogyny.

All references to myths in the novel are vague, so it is open to many possible readings. An old woman from the village said that Jamie and Peter

were abducted by the pooka, “an ancient child-scarer out of legend, a wild mischief-making descendant of Pan and ancestor of Puck” [French 2007: 217]. The scholars of Celtic mythology connect pooka with pixies, a kind of fairies who could enchant humans and lead them off their way to the underworld.

Another mythological figure in the narrative is the witch, a human-antagonistic female with the power to overlap the otherworld and the world of people, transform or imitate entities. Rob recalls witches in connection with Cassie, envisioning her as “a queen in a fairy tale, left alone in her tower to mourn her lost, witch-stolen princess” [French 2007: 64]. The plot motif uniting fairies, shapeshifting, the witch, and the fallen hero is very common in Celtic folklore. It appears, for example, in the famous Scottish ballad “Tam Lin” [The English and Scottish Popular Ballads 2014: 335–358]. In the ballad Tam, once a noble knight, was captivated by the Queen of fairies. Faced with a threat to lose immortal soul forever, he begged his lover Janet to help him become human again. Janet had to recognize him in the mounted row of fairy knights, catch and hold him tightly despite all his transformations into monstrous beasts or burning iron.

Some parallels can be drawn between the story of “Tam Lin” and the mythological plot of *In the Woods*. Supposedly, the three children had been kidnapped by the Queen of fairies, a female pooka or a witch. Rob’s friends had joined the fairies immediately, and Rob stuck in the intermediate position between the world of mortals and the ghostly land of spirits. Cassie attempted at playing the role of Janet, casting demons out of Rob’s soul. At that, she had to combat another incarnation of the Queen of fairies and a witch-like figure – psychopath Rosalind Devlin who instigated the murder of her sister. Rosalind assumed the air of a meek and helpless girl and manipulated Rob into believing her lies. As a result, the case against Rosalind was not built properly.

At the end, Cassie did not manage to become the female savior of the enchanted knight. Rob let her abandoned and isolated, metaphorically imprisoned in the tower of disillusionment and bitterness. Comparing Rob’s and Cassie’s trajectories as they are described in the narrative, it becomes clear that Cassie’s development is much closer to Campbell’s idea of hero’s mythological journey. Cassie undertook a trip that ended in a temporary defeat, but she has strength and courage to carry on. Rob forever remained in his childhood role of the fallen hero with no hope of recuperation.

The heterotopia of the woods plays a crucial role in the narrative. It represents the mythological and historical past of Ireland that is steadily falling into oblivion. Also, as the woods differ significantly from the residential urban areas, their symbolism of otherness overlaps with the idea of

Irish femininity, which, according to Geraldine Meany, for many centuries was conceptualised as “an aberration” from the norm [Meany 1991: 20].

Supposedly, Dolores Redondo’s *El Guardián Invisible* (2013) represents one of the most coherent attempts to deconstruct the previously acknowledged concept of femininity. Its protagonist, inspector Amaia Salazar, is an outstanding example of a working woman in high position. She leads an investigation of a series of teenage girls’ murders in the small village of Elizondo, surrounded by the woods and situated in the vicinity of the Baztán River. Despite inevitable envy and sexism in the workplace, Amaia establishes her authority and demonstrates high professionalism and dedication, which resulted in successful resolution of the case. At the same time, for her the process of investigation becomes an arena of thoughtful reflection about the roots and conflicting sides of her own identity.

From the onset, the portrayal of Amaia Salazar stresses her conscious approach to representing herself as a professional above all. She despises the exterior manifestations of femininity, cultivating “un aspecto serio y algo masculino” [Redondo 2013: 34], but takes advantage of the female way of thinking, syncretic and non-schematic, combining strict logic with revelations provided by myth and even Tarot cards.

Amaia’s identity construction involves space, as she is gaining more spatial performance through recognizing the mysterious power of the woods. Having survived as a child many years of abuse and even a murder attempt, Amaia felt happy to escape from her native village to a big city and stay out of reach of the past with its painful memories and unresolved mysteries. Her urban experience can be associated with the rational and intellectual side of her personality. However, returning to the village made her live through the old trauma again. Unlike Tana French’s Rob Ryan, Amaia succeeded in removing mental barriers between herself and the phantoms invading her unconscious memory. For her, it meant getting to grips with the irrational associated in the novel with the uncanny beings residing in “el grandioso bosque de Baztán” [Redondo 2013: 76].

While in *El guardián invisible* the magical creatures from the woods like “brujas, sorgiñas, belagiles, basajaun, tartalo” [Redondo 2013: 93] are inspired by the Basque-Navarran folklore, the narrative establishes connections with the mythologies of other nations. The woods are depicted as deeply local but having links with Celtic, Russian, and Black American beliefs. These connections help Amaia to transcend the claustrophobic boundaries of her past. However, Amaia’s identity mapping is largely determined by the local mythology and culture as they “constitute part of the protagonist’s genetic makeup” [Delgado-Poust 2017: 628].

Same as *In the Woods*, *El Guardián Invisible* features not only a story of detection, but also a metaphysical plot of a spellbound child that turns into a female hero and forces her way out of imprisonment. In Redondo's narrative mythical figures make stronger presence as compared to French's novel. Basajaun, "lord of the forest" [Barandiarán 2008: 92], and Mari, a powerful spirit giving special assistance to women, appear as magical helpers to assist Amaia in her crusade for the ultimate truth. She has to combat against several monstrous figures, most importantly, the abhorrent witch whose role in the novel is performed by Amaia's psychotic mother.

Analysing the similitude of the two novels under considerations, we can notice parallels between them both at the level of how the detective formula is used and at the level of particular subplots and details. While connecting the metaphysics of evil with different national mythologies, these novels implicitly study the ways to explain recurrent crimes against women. These narratives describe small peripheral communities as models of the wider society, of which every member could be accused of silently sustaining the culture of abandonment and violence. Moreover, the space of the woods as a pocket of otherness is associated with the primordial feminine power. From the point of view of the genre theory of postmodern metaphysical crime novel, the woods are also used as a metaphor of discursive nonsolution and the absence of a climatic break in the detective plot.

Also, the novels by Tana French and Dolores Redondo show several other similarities: the subplot of the childhood traumatic experience blocked from the adult memory; a detective puzzle intertwining the present with the past; parallels between criminal investigation and archaeological research, and above all, constructing female identity as the space of alterity that is deeply ingrained in the national cultural landscape.

The most obvious differences between the novels pertain to the role of female characters in the detective plot and discourse. Redondo's protagonist breaks away from the flour container where her mother tried to bury her, and embraces new spatialities, thus becoming a full-fledged person and professional. In French's novel the female detective is often bound hand and foot by the existing policies and procedures. Nevertheless, she has great potential that has yet to be revealed. So, it can be concluded that the presence of female protagonism in these thrillers reflects the general idea of female worthiness and authority dominating national societies at the time when the novels were written.

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ФЕМИНИЗАЦИЯ ТОПОСА ЛЕСА В РОМАНАХ ТАНЫ ФРЕНЧ «В ЛЕСНОЙ ЧАЩЕ» И ДОЛОРЕС РЕДОНДО «НЕВИДИМЫЙ СТРАЖ»

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В статье рассматриваются повествовательные средства феминизации топоса леса в двух романах: «В лесной чаще» Таны Френч и «Невидимом страже» Долорес Редондо. В качестве теоретической базы выступает феминистская школа литературной критики. Одним из ключевых понятий является гетеротопия Мишеля Фуко. Методология анализа включает сопоставление сюжетобразующих средств, важных мотивов и пространственной поэтики леса в двух романах. Было выявлено существенное сходство этих романов с точки зрения изображения леса как гетеротопии, воплощающей женское начало, и связи ее символики с национальными мифологиями двух культур, ирландской и баско-наваррской.

Ключевые слова: гетеротопия, топос леса, Тана Френч, «В лесной чаще», Долорес Редондо, «Невидимый страж», феминизация.

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